

TWO HIGHLY READABLE NOVELS AT A MARKED SAVING

The March Double Selection

FORTUNE MADE HIS SWORD • Henry V, "the first real English king," had a short but remarkable life. At 14 he was "already a dangerous seducer and fighter." At 28 he had won his great victory at Agincourt. At 35 he was dead, worn out by his own ambition. Here, in a grand historical novel, is the story of his life, "a splendid full-scale portrait of a mighty man."

THE NIXON RECESSION CAPER • Four men of substance, all living the glossy life of Connecticut exurbanites, suddenly find themselves jobless and moneyless. What to do? Since "it's a bigger disgrace to be broke in this town than to be crooked," the obvious solution is to rob a bank. Which is precisely what they do in this hilarious novel written by "an expert on the sexual mores, marital tensions and drinking habits of the quasi-beautiful people."

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FRONT COVER: Detail from **HUNTERS IN THE SNOW** by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30-69), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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Fortune
Made
His
Sword



REPORT BY Gilbert Highet

ALL great men and women are complicated. Neither their admirers nor their servants, their enemies nor their lovers, ever understand them fully. Sometimes they hardly understand their own natures. They have not one but several selves; as they live through trials and triumphs, they grow and change and yet seem to remain true to some inmost master-self, which remains a mystery.

Without doubt Henry V of England was a great man. Reigning from 1413 to 1422, he wore himself out, and died only 35 years old; but before that he had quelled destructive revolts in his dominions and brought peace for a time, he had fought important wars abroad, and he had become a statesman of European magnitude. Among other successes, he helped to heal that festering wound within the Church, the Papal schism. In some ways he was the first real English king. The monarchs before him, ever since the Conquest, had talked French. Henry spoke and wrote English. We can feel this strongly in Shakespeare's *Henry V*: in the lovemaking scene with Princess Katharine he cries "Now fie upon my false French! By mine honour in true English, I love thee, Kate!" And his magnificent speech at the siege of Harfleur—the speech in which Laurence Olivier's voice rang out like a trumpet—ends exactly right with "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"

And still the first words Henry says in this novel are "We are not the true kings of England." He was a complex man. In her deeply thoughtful story Martha Rofheart does full justice to his character, lonely and involuted, and to his career, difficult and dangerous.

She does not narrate Henry's life from the outside, as though she were an omniscient observer watching him. She herself never intrudes, never appears. The tale is told chiefly by those who know the young king and admire him, and partly by Henry himself. We see him therefore through several different minds. The novel is like one of the big new jigsaw puzzles which, when put together, assemble into a portrait, coming to life slowly as the pieces match and at last gazing out clear in every detail.

Among those who tell of Henry's life, two are women who loved him: the strong Welsh princess Morgan ab Owen, and the weak charming French princess Katharine of Valois. Two are men who served him: Hercules, the fool at his father's court, and John Page, a soldier who fought with him in France. At the outset Henry himself recalls his own childhood; at the end he takes up the story to describe his last few years as king; and then there is an epilogue, because time never stops, and, even when a monarch dies, history moves on like a vast current in the ocean.

THE six different portraits show six different Henrys. But further, they are arranged in a time sequence. They make a history of the man's whole career, beginning in 1391, when he was a child of 4, much in awe of his gaunt grandfather and terrified of his harsh father, ending in 1422, as he commends his soul to God and his kingdom to his greedy kinsmen as guardians for his baby son and heir. After his childhood, Morgan ab Owen, scion of a dynasty of witches, describes how she knew him as a youth of 14, already a dangerous seducer and fighter. Hercules, a pitiful dwarf whose face has been carved into a perpetual lipless grin, was sent as a gift to

Hal's father, Henry IV. As a close observer at the court, Hercules tells how the old king, incurably diseased, was slowly supplanted and at last succeeded by young Hal as the fifth Henry; and how the new king prepared to make war in France.

WAR. We all hate it. It has always been hateful, and often unnecessary, and sometimes fruitless. And yet nations become rivals and enemies; ambitious rulers lust for booty and power; men gladly follow a gallant chief; cowardice is thought a shame and courage against hard odds a virtue. Henry V's war in France is described by one of his own soldiers, who might have come straight out of Shakespeare's play ("We know enough, if we know we are the King's subjects"), and whose memory of the campaign has more mud than blood, more hunger than plunder, more misery than splendor, but ends with the amazing victory at Agincourt.

With that battle Henry won a huge claim to power in France, and with it a bride: Katharine, small, pretty, sensuous and faithful to him while he lived. She describes "her Harry" as a gallant suitor and ardent lover, a healthy storm-blast blowing through the French court full of adulterous intrigues and vile corruptions. He leaves her pregnant with his first son, to fight still more and more, and to kill himself with his own ambition.

It is a fine story, built around a fine central character: admirable if not wholly likable, attractive even when hard to understand; a king who nearly faints from exhaustion at his coronation feast but can live on walnuts and dirty water while leading his army toward an all but impossible triumph of resolution and valor. It is filled with men and women of many dif-

ferent degrees and natures: an effeminate king (Richard II) and another miserably mad (Charles VI of France); Oldcastle, champion of the Lollard heretics who held the Pope to be Antichrist; Geoffrey Chaucer, the first great poet to write in English; Owen Glendower, the last Welsh prince of Wales. They all appear, loving and hating and intriguing.

The title of the novel comes from the Epilogue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Looking back at the play, the Chorus says that for such a hero five acts were too brief.

*Small time; but in that small,
most greatly lived
This star of England. Fortune
made his sword.*

If you know *Henry V* and the two parts of its predecessor, *Henry IV*, you will admire Martha Rofheart's psychological finesse. Many incidents which Shakespeare treated as broad farce (like Prince Hal's pranks as a highway robber) or harsh contrast (like his putting on his dying father's crown) are skillfully retold and reinterpreted; and the poet's distortions of fact (for instance, making Hotspur a youngster no older than Hal) are quietly corrected. The result is that both Henry and his associates become less stogy and more fully believable. Shakespeare himself, speaking through his Chorus, apologized for compressing the story, and begged the audience to help him out.

*I humbly pray them to admit the excuse
Of time, of numbers, and due course
of things,
Which cannot in their huge and
proper life
Be here presented.*

Martha Rofheart has used her historical knowledge and her creative imagination to give us a splendid full-scale portrait of a mighty man.

